JESUS HAD A MOTHER
DECEMBER 11, 2011

JOHN BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 126
Luke 1:26-38
Luke 1:46-55

"Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord: let it be with me according to your word."
Luke 1:38 (NRSV)

As the pace quickens, with more preparations to make than time in which to make them – slow us down. Remind us that there is enough time to do what is important. Give us a few moments of silence this morning to ponder the quiet event that is coming: to prepare our hearts to receive him and welcome him again… Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

She is the one person in all of history who knew Jesus everyday of his life. She carried him in her womb. She gave birth to him in the same way every human being comes into the world – labor, pain, blood, and a first breath and first cry. She nursed him, cradled him, bathed him, sang songs to him. Mary prepared food for him, fed him, showed him how to drink from a cup, use a spoon, held his hand as he took his first step. Mary smoothed his garment and hair, maybe she even flattened a stubborn cowlick with her saliva as my mother did to me to my everlasting irritation, as Joseph took him to the Synagogue on the Sabbath. Mary presided over the little home in Nazareth as he worked in his father's carpenter shop, learning the trade. Years later, when, around the age of thirty he tried to explain to her how he had an increasingly urgent sense that God had something for him to do, that he had to follow what seemed like a call from God to teach and heal the sick and proclaim good news of God's love, and that he would be leaving home and striking out on this new adventure, on his own, with no apparent means of support, she surely must have protested. "That sounds like a great idea. You're going to walk away from a steady income, a roof over your head and food on the table, and walk around Galilee talking about God? Where's the future, the security in that?" She surely said something like that: sooner or

later every parent does. And then, I suspect, just as she was trying to persuade her oldest child not to take foolish risks, she must have remembered the day a mysterious messenger from God, she couldn't tell you exactly who or what it was, but there was that day when she knew, more in her heart than her mind, that God had something for her to do, and she – young, unmarried, poor – decided to do it. And so, she finally said, "All right. But if you're going to do this, I'm coming with you. Wherever you are going, I'm coming along." And that is what she did, stayed with him for three years. She was with him as he called young men to join him in this adventure: Peter, John, James, Andrew and women, too, Martha and Mary. And when he decided to establish a kind of headquarters in Capernaum, a small Galileean village, as a place for the little band to rest and talk and eat together, although the Bible doesn't exactly say it, I can't help but think she was there too, presiding over that home, preparing meals for them, adopting as her own that robust group of strong young men and women, as her own sons and daughters, listening as they talked so passionately, sitting around her table – entering in, I know, as they talked about God, and the moral law, and their people's oppression, and the marginalized, poor and sick and their dreams for a better world, in fact a new world, a new creation they dared to believe God was bringing about in them. She was surely there.

She followed him all the way to Jerusalem and watched as the terrible, holy events of that week evolved. She was there in the crowd when he was led to his trial and in the crowd the next morning when religion and patriotism melded into violent hatred and the crowd turned on him. She was there when he was nailed to a cross, and refused to leave him when all the others – Peter, John, James – all of them, fled in fear.

And after Easter, Resurrection, she was part of the little band that refused to believe he was dead, believed that he was alive and with them and decided to give the rest of their lives, and to suffer whatever came of it, to him and to the good news he taught and lived – of God's love and God's coming kingdom.

And yet, Mary, ironically stands right in the center of the deep divide in Christianity, five centuries old, between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. In Roman Catholicism, she is at the heart of things. Churches are named for her, Notre Dame in Paris, the most famous church in Christendom: Universities named for her but known more for football

prowess, her figure stands in countless Catholic churches, she is venerated by millions upon millions of roman Catholics all over the world who make pilgrimages to places she is believed to have appeared. Just last week 100,000 pilgrims came to the shrine of Our Lady of Gauadelupe in Des Plaines to participate in a festival that pays homage to the day when the faithful believe Mary appeared to an Aztec woman in Mexico in 1531. The second most familiar and beloved prayer in Christendom, prayed daily by millions and millions, is to her, Hail Mary! The Ave Maria.

Now, in the interest of full disclosure, the family that lighted the Advent Candle this morning at 11:00, consisted of a Presbyterian father, and a Roman Catholic mother, whose name, by the way, is Mary; my son and daughter-in-law. Their three daughters, obvious to anyone who sees them, are three of the most exquisite creatures God ever created, attend a fine parochial school, and mass with their mother and sometimes their father, and they also attend here. I suppose the answer to the question, are the Catholics or Protestants? Is "yes." Kate was chosen to climb a ladder and place a crown on Mary's head on a feast day. She has had her first communion. Her sister Ella will have her first communion at St. Mathias in May and word is that I may have a part in it. But they are also Presbyterians. They come here too and their favorite thing about Fourth Presbyterian is the doughnut holes after church. I was told that on one occasion, after Mass at St. Mathias, one of them in a loud, demanding voice asked "Where are the doughnut holes?" So, as long as we keep the doughnut holes coming we have a foot in the door.

I want them to know that Mary has a place in our version of Christian faith because in Protestantism she is in absentia, standing out on the periphery, far from the center. When Martin Luther and his followers swept away centuries of Roman tradition of venerating saints, Mary was swept away too.

Peter Gomes used to say that Protestants don't know what to do with Mary because we think she's a Catholic. So we ignore her. She shows up in our crèches at Christmas. She is on a lot of Christmas Cards, but for the rest of the year she is not mentioned. Peter Gomes used to tell a story about the Dean of St. Paul's Anglican Cathedral in London, having died and gone to heaven was welcomed by Jesus. "Welcome to heaven, Dean," Jesus said, "I know you have met my Father, but I don't believe you know my mother."

Roman Catholics believe Mary was conceived immaculately, as was Jesus. She lived without sin. Her virginity was perpetual and that she never died but was assumed bodily into heaven. Protestants simply don't know what to make of all that. Protestants believe Mary had other children: Jesus had brothers and sisters. But mostly we ignore her.

I have concluded, over the years, that we are missing something very important about our Christian faith if we do not pay attention to Mary, and acknowledge her central role in our story. Not only is she a major player in the Christian story, without Mary, we miss critical truths about God, Jesus and our own efforts to be faithful to him.

Her story begins in the first chapter of Luke, with the Annunciation, the visit of an angel. "Greetings, Favored One!" the angel says. "The Lord is with you – Do not be afraid, Mary. You will conceive and bear a son, the son of the Most High." "How can this be since I am a virgin?" Mary protests. The voice assures her that nothing, not even this is, impossible for God. Mary says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word."

It is one of the most painted scenes in all of art. An intriguing modern work by Henry Ossawa Tanner, represents the angel Gabriel – not as a beautiful young man, or woman, with wings, but as a mysterious, bright "column of light appearing before Mary." [Kimberly Bracker Long, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B Vol 1]

Something is going on here that transcends analysis or understanding. Mary doesn't understand her experience, questions the angel, doubts, but finally "knows" in her heart and responds in strength "Here Am I."

Mary visits an older relative, Elizabeth, who also is unexpectedly pregnant. It is Elizabeth who says the words of the Ave Maria, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of our womb."

Mary's response, now that she's had a little time to ponder what is happening to her is a poem we know as the Magnificent –

> "My Soul magnifies the Lord –
> he has looked with favor on the
> lowliness of his servant.

He has brought down the powerful
from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good
things and sent the rich away empty."

Apparently Mary has come to see that the child in her womb will do important things, that he will envision a new world, a new way of being in the world. Apparently Mary understands that her son will always challenge the conventional, established order of things, that he will side with outsiders, feed hungry people, welcome outcasts and in the process establish a kind of alternative world to the way things are in this world. Hungry people will be fed, oppressed people will be free. Marginalized people will be welcomed and affirmed. And there will be justice, God's precious gift of justice, everywhere.

There's a lot about the Occupy Wall Street demonstration that makes us uncomfortable. But, it seems to me that before we dismiss it – this public expression of anger at unprecedented economic injustice and disparity, we ought to sit for a few moments with Mary's Magnificat.

Jesus was nowhere more the Son of Mary than when he lived out, in his teaching, his living and dying, the strong themes of her Magnificat.

God's choice of Mary is provocative, precisely because it is so unlikely. In her time, and at that place, Mary was nothing. Young, underage, a girl; a young woman in a culture that regarded young women as the property of their fathers who essentially sold them to the highest bidders, then the property of husbands who could divorce them the moment they become tired of them. Poor, young, vulnerable – probably barely literate, it is difficult to imagine a more unlikely prospect to join God in the redemption of the world. Think about what that says about God. The "Scandal of Particularity" the theologians call it, understanding that it offends our reason: that the omnipotent, omniscient, all powerful creator and King of the universe, would come into human history in this way, that the Son of God would be born, not in the royal palace of Pharaoh, or the Roman Emperor, or even King Herod the Great, but of a young, poor, peasant girl, a preposterous idea. Or that the source and ground of being, the One behind all existence, the Truth above all truth, should be revealed not in a universally acclaimed philosophical thesis, or a brilliant mathematical

formula – but a baby, a particular infant, born to a particular woman, at a particular time and place… counterintuitive at the very least.

That is what Mary's pregnancy, and labor and delivery, and Mary's baby, says about God. And it takes my breath away still. Almighty God – there, lying in a manger.

Think about what Mary's part in the Christian drama says about human beings, about you and me. It has always been the conventional view of Mary that she was a model Christian because she was submissive; she submitted to the will of God, a kind of passive vessel or vehicle of the incarnation. With the advent of Christian feminism, feminist theologians, Catholic and Protestant, began to say, "Wait a minute! Mary is a player, a major player." Her "Here Am I" is not so much meek submission as it is a strong, personal affirmation of her self, her integrity, her very being. One of those theologians who I am privileged to know and admire very much, Cynthia Rigby, who teaches theology at Austin Seminary, observes – "We post-moderns must have freedom to make choices… For us, to be fully human is to be free, and to be free is to have choices." Rigby observes that serious theology has always objected to defining freedom as unlimited choice, freedom from any kind of restraint or condition, and he's always wanted to define Christian freedom as freedom "for", freedom to make good, responsible choices, freedom finally to choose to be who we most deeply and authentically are, freedom to be who God asks us to be.

She observes that artists are not really free not to be artists, painters are not really free to be anything but artists – the great Rainer Maria Rilke said that poets must be poets, should not be poets if they could be anything else. We often say that about ministry – you shouldn't go into it if you can avoid it.

Mary's "Here Am I. Let it be to me according to your word" is, in this sense, a deep and powerful affirmation of who she is. It is not any more submission to something being imposed on her by God than J.S. Bach's decision to write music, Rembrandt's to paint, Mother Theresa's to do what she did (see Peter Gomes, *Sermons* p.14). It is not unlike our deeply personal decision to do with our lives what we know ourselves most deeply and authentically to be: husband, wife, father, mother, doctor, homemaker, helper, musician, teacher, athlete, politician, social worker, meal server, bread maker, tutor.

“Mary,” Cynthia Rigby says, “is not being asked to put herself aside, but to claim who she is, Child of God. Servant of God.” [*Blessed one, Protestant Perspectives on Mary* Beverly Gaventa and Cynthia Rigby]

Princeton’s Beverly Gaventa, another Feminist theologian I admire, urges: “Don’t forget who nursed, nurtured, taught, sang to him, played with him, told him stories which may later have come the parables he told.” [*Blessed One*] Don’t forget who his mother was.

Jesus had a father and a mother, who both did their best and were as faithful as they could be. In their faithfulness, but also their humanness, they show us who God is, and how God comes into the world, in unexpected ways, through the lives of quite ordinary human beings. Mary and Joseph teach us to watch for God in the unlikely places, among the most vulnerable, the poor, the outcasts, the weak. They teach us that God comes to us, and asks us to follow, to live and be – for him and his kingdom on earth.

So let’s make a place for Mary – at the very center of our faith. And if we cannot quite bring ourselves to pray to her, let’s at least acknowledge that she knew her son far better than anyone else conceivably could have. So let’s acknowledge her, respect her, thank God for her and on occasion – salute her – Hail Mary!

It is her art that has opened my heart and mind.

I have concluded that over the years my very favorite art has to do with her.

The painting of the Annunciation by Fra Angelico in the monastery of San Marcos in Florence, which I had seen in books and read about, stopped me in my tracks when I saw it. Pastel colors, quiet, Mary and the angel leaning toward each other, the angel waiting for response.

The Pieta in St. Peter’s in Rome, Michelangelo’s Masterpiece, literally took my breath away with its beauty and poignancy, the lifeless body of Jesus draped across his mother’s lap, a representation of every mother who ever lost a child: the young Chicago mother whose six year old is killed in a gang shooting: the suburban mother whose strong young child, so full of hope and potential, is killed in Afghanistan. And, in my study, a picture of the

same moment – Mary holding the body of the crucified Jesus. It's by Leszek Pytka's father-in-law, Robert Deptuta. Leszek heard me speak about how I love the Piete and asked his father-in-law, a University professor in Poland, to paint it for me.

And music – Franz Beibl's Ave Maria, which I have loved ever since I first heard it: the close harmony, the ancient antiphonal response, a reminder of how old this prayer is and how many people have prayed it, and yet the modern feel of it.

And, of course, drama. There aren't many modern dramatic portraits of the Nativity, other than Amahl and the Night Visitors. But there is the perennial favorite, the annual Children's Christmas Pageant, which will be presented in most churches sometime in the next two weeks. It will happen here at 4:00 on Christmas Eve, and it is maybe the most wonderful, certainly most chaotic event in the sanctuary all year long. The sanctuary will be filled with people of all ages, lots of little ones, standing up in the pews to watch as angels and shepherds and donkeys and wise men and camels walk down the aisle. In these productions, the role of Mary is the prize, highly sought after, coveted, and occasionally fought over, I am told. The role of Mary, this year, I learned has been given to Rachel who, like Mary, is young, seventeen about Mary's age and vulnerable, and has many challenges, and has to contend with social conventions and structures that seem sometimes to be stacked against her, and about whom, like Mary, there are few hopeful expectations and aspirations. Rachel, in addition to and in spite of the fact that she too is my granddaughter, is, I think, a very good choice for the role of Mary. Rachel is a child with Down Syndrome and for seventeen years she has been teaching me, all of us actually, about the mystery of life and our humanity and what makes us human, and has, without knowing it of course, like Mary, been teaching me, and all of us, never to underestimate anyone, never to discount anyone's potential, even the smallest , to reveal God's truth. She has taught me about God's goodness and grace – in the smallest, the weakest, the most vulnerable. She will be an appropriate young Mary of Nazareth.

So, yes. Yes, indeed.

> "Hail Mary. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus."

Amen.